DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 423 429 CE 077 221

AUTHOR	Brown, Bettina Lankard
TITLE	Family Literacy: Respecting Family Ways. ERIC Digest No. 203.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Columbus, OH.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-CE-98-203
PUB DATE	1998-00-00
NOTE	4p.
CONTRACT	RR93002001
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Basic Education; Adult Literacy; Community Influence; Context Effect; *Educational Environment; Educational Needs; Empowerment; Family Environment; *Family Influence; Family Life; *Family Literacy; *Family School Relationship; Functional Literacy; *Literacy Education; Power Structure; Workplace Literacy
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Family literacy programs must acknowledge the family as the primary place of learning, and developers of family literacy programs and curricula must focus on the family unit as a whole, building upon the cultural and knowledge capital of the entire family and acknowledging gender and age power relationships within the family. Educators must redefine the relationship of literacy to poverty and socioeconomic status and acknowledge that families who lack English proficiency can offer other family members their languages, multiple approaches to literacy, and ability to deal with life events. Most educational approaches to family literacy recognize parents as a child's most important teachers but fail to recognize the value of literacy transmission from adult to adult, child to adult, or sibling to sibling that occurs in various community cultures. When designing programs and curricula, family literacy practitioners must realize that power issues, particularly those that are education related, can influence a family's literacy practices. Practitioners must also determine how the workplace fits into families' lives. Family literacy programs must be centered in the context of family literacy's real-world application in the home, and they must draw on the experiences and strengths of the families being served. (MN)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 423 429

Family Literacy: Respecting Family Ways
ERIC Digest No. 203

Bettina Lankard Brown

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education
Center on Education and Training for Employment
College of Education
The Ohio State University
1900 Kenny Road
Columbus, OH 43210-1090

CE077221

DIGEST NO. 203

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

1998

EDO-CE-98-203

by Bettina Lankard Brown

Family Literacy: Respecting Family Ways

Throughout history, the family has been the primary source for learning. Before the advent of schools, children were taught at home by their parents, older siblings, grandparents, and/or other relatives. With the introduction of formal schooling, the teaching of values, cultural practices, and skills such as cooking, sewing, farming, and trapping continued to originate in the home. Today, in spite of the vast public and private educational systems, some parents are choosing to teach their children at home, confident in their belief that teaching in the context of family is the best way to ensure the learning the desire.

Public agencies, such as the National Center for Family Literacy, and private foundations, such as the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, have shown their support of the family as a primary place of learning by funding programs that provide training and assistance to families for the promotion of literacy. This Digest discusses the family as a preferred place of literacy development and highlights family literacy initiatives that reflect respect for the family as a site of learning.

A Contextual Connection

Because the family exists in a network of community, its members are continually communicating, negotiating, and otherwise interacting with schools and business institutions in the workplace, within the context of their cultural and community orientations (Bhola 1996). The social aspect of these relationships suggests that the development of programs and curriculum must focus on the family unit as a whole, building upon the cultural and knowledge capital of the entire family, and acknowledging gender and age power relationships within the family.

Teaching literacy within the context of the family and in ways that are meaningful to family members is an approach described by Auerbach (1989), who contends that the cultural and social practices of a family are key considerations in the development of family literacy programs. Auerbach's "socio-contextual model" is congruent with the contextual teaching and learning approach to knowledge development. This approach is based on the proposition that students learn best when the learning is meaningful to them and situated in the context of their social environments. This model acknowledges that there are family-relevant, as well as school-relevant, ways of bringing literacy into the home. It acknowledges the positive contributions of family members and takes into account the influence that cultural values and practices have on literacy development.

The Value of Different Literacies

Because school-based family literacy efforts are typically directed to people from poor, minority, and/or immigrant families who lack English proficiency, some of these programs assume that these individuals have little to offer and that the school must determine the forms of literacy that are acceptable for the family. Referring to this model as deficit driven, Taylor ("Book Notes" 1998) challenges educators to redefine the relationship of literacy to poverty and socioeconomic status and to acknowledge the wealth of knowledge members of these families offer, e.g., their languages, multiple approaches to literacy, and ability to deal with life events.

Although all literacies are not equally valued in our society, there are ways in which all parents make literacy contributions and that awareness of these contributions can occur when parents engage in literacy experiences that have meaningful application in their lives (Crowther and Tett 1997). The FLITE (Family Literacy Involvement Through Education) program is one example of an effort designed to involve participants in literacy development through the sharing of real-life experiences (Griswold and Ullman 1997). Evolving through a partnership between a Bronx public school and the City University of New York, FLITE featured a series of workshops, one of which engaged participants in recipe sharing as a means of enhancing reading, writing, and speaking skills. Some participants prepared dishes that they brought for others to taste; some shared written recipes of dishes popular in their cultures; some shared memories of times when the dishes were served in their family homes; and some told about the countries from which their dishes originated. Such workshops are a powerful tool for enhancing the knowledge and literacy of all participants and are an example of contextual learning in the social environment of community.

Communication about personal experiences was also a part of the "Connect" project conducted in a poor working-class area of Edinburgh, Scotland (Crowther and Tett 1997) . Participants in the program activities were encouraged to discuss their school experiences and to describe some of the ways in which they were helping their children toward literacy. By highlighting similarities between the participants' and their teacher's pedagogic practices, the act of teaching became less threatening.

Variations in Family Literacy Practices

Most educational approaches to family literacy recognize the parents, especially the mother, as a child's most important teacher. "This restricted notion of family literacy pays too much attention to the mother-child dyad and fails to take advantage of or take into account multiple other channels of literacy influences within the family" (Puchner 1997, p. 3). It fails to recognize the value of literacy transmission from adult to adult, child to adult, or sibling to sibling as occurs in various community cultures.

In a study of language skills of Southeast Asian immigrants in the United States, researchers found that literacy transfer typically occurred from sibling to sibling because lack of English proficiency limited parents' ability to help their children (Puchner 1997). Parents who have limited English proficiency, for example, often lack confidence in their ability to participate in family literacy programs. However, literacy workers can help these parents to recognize ways in which they already contribute to their children's literacy, e.g., by allotting a time and space for their children to do homework and/or by observing, or having older children observe, homework activities. Once parents recognize that their efforts to facilitate literacy development are worthwhile, they become less apt to succumb to other pressures on their time and energy that could divert them from practices that further their own and their children's education.

Drawing upon the personal interests and experiences of parents can often lead them to adopt new literacy practices. For example, in the FLITE "home visit" program, a father who was unable to read or write was coached to tell a story about his personal experiences using a tape recorder. The family literacy worker asked the man's wife to listen to the recording and write down on paper the words he had recorded so she could read it back to him. Later the family worker brought a picture book to the home for the father and child to look at while he told a story he made up to go along with the pictures. This example illustrates three aspects of the FLITE program's approach to literacy (Griswold and Ullman 1997, p. 16): (1) the range of purposes for literate behaviors is broad, (2) learning experiences can be generative, and (3) learning does not have to be an individual experience.

Power Considerations in Literacy Outcomes

Power issues, particularly those that are education related, can influence a family's literacy practices (Puchner 1997; Tett and St. Clair 1997). Parents who cannot speak English or who believe that they have no right to interfere with a school's practices may avoid contact with the school and its teachers, which tends to perpetuate the literacy status quo (Tett and St. Clair 1997). "If parents are to be genuine partners in their children's education, then they must be able to share power, responsibility, and ownership in ways which show a high degree of mutuality" (p. 111).

Morrow and Young (1996) note the importance of power sharing within the family through their description of the Family WRAP (Writing and Reading Appreciation for Parents and Pupils) program, an inner-city school district program involving African-American and Latino families with children in the first to third grades. In this program, parents and children were partnered in reading, writing, and storytelling activities, with interaction being the key ingredient. Throughout the program, parents were asked for their input. As a result, the parents began to realize that they shared power, not only with their children in learning, but with the school in creating a literacy program that was meaningful to them. The parents became "more willing to share their ideas . . ., ask questions, and express their concerns" (Morrow and Young 1996, p. 17). Through their involvement in WRAP, they "felt more comfortable about coming to school and participating, and had more self-confidence about being able to help their children" (ibid.).

The Community Connection to Family Literacy

Communities have become diverse in cultures, workplaces, interests, and political orientations. "Family literacy practitioners, in the process of program design, and while making choices of curriculum, will have to look at the existing conditions of families in question, in the context of both history and subaltern history of race- and class-related experiences of those families" (Ebola 1996, p. 41). They need to look into how the workplace fits into the lives of the families.

In some communities, literacy programs are conducted on the job. Winthrop University in Rock Hill, South Carolina, for example, has a literacy program for its custodial, gardening, and refuse collection department employees, some of whom have less than a sixth-grade education. Participants attend 2-hour sessions each week for a 12-week period during which they and their families engage in literacy activities that involve the reading of children's, work-related, and personal literature (Richards 1998). The "Using Children's Literature" module of the program involves participants in reading activities that include prediction, characterization, sequencing, inferencing, and imagery. During class, the participants record their reactions to the readings in a log book; at home, they read and discuss the books with family members. The "Using Work-Related Literature" module involves participants in reading about hazardous materials and safety on the job and in the home. The "Using Personal Literature" module involves participants in writing and sharing stories about their life experiences with others in class and, later, with their children at home. The three modules of this program reflect an exemplary effort to connect home, school, and workplace literacy applications.

Summary

The importance of centering family literacy in the context of its "real-world" application in the home and of drawing upon the experiences and strengths of the families being served is highlighted by the examples described in this Digest. The successes of these literacy programs reinforce the notion that generalizations about literacy program participants are unfair. They underscore the need to bring together in mutual respect and collaboration members of the family unit, school, and community.

References

Auerbach, E. R. "Toward a Social-Contextual Approach to Family Literacy." *Harvard Educational Review* 59, no. 2 (Summer 1989): 165-181.

Ebola, H. S. "Family Literacy Development and Culture: Interconnections, Reconstructions." *Convergence* 29, no. 1 (1996): 34-45.

"Book Notes. Review of 'Many Families, Many Literacies: An International Declaration of Principles,' edited by Denny Taylor." *Harvard Educational Review* 68, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 268-269.

Crowther, J., and Tett, L. "Literacies Not Literacy." *Adults Learning* 8, no. 8 (April 1997): 207-209.

Griswold, K., and Ullman, C. M. *Not a One-Way Street: the Power of Reciprocity in Family Literacy Programs*. Bronx: City University of New York, 1997. (ED 413 420)

Morrow, L. M., and Young, J. *Parent, Teacher, and Child Participation in a Collaborative Family Literacy Program: The Effects on Attitude, Motivation, and Literacy Achievement Reading Research Report no. 64*. College Park, MD, and Athens, GA: National Reading Research Center, 1996. (ED 395 551)

Puchner, L. D. *Family Literacy in Cultural Context: Lessons from Two Case Studies*. Philadelphia: National Center on Adult Literacy, University of Pennsylvania, 1997. (ED 412 376)

Richards, R. T. "When Family Literacy Begins on the Job." *Educational Leadership* 55, no. 8 (May 1998): 78-80.

Tett, L., and St. Clair, R. "Family Literacy in the Educational Marketplace: A Cultural Perspective." *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 16, no. 2 (March-April 1997): 109-120.

Developed with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under Contract No. RR93002001. Opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of OERI or the Department. Digests may be freely reproduced.

CENTER ON EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR EMPLOYMENT
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION
THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY